

Pioneering training course at HMP Acklington

Her Majesty's Prison (HMP) Acklington's innovative, pioneering, industry-backed cable jointing training course for offenders is proving highly successful and attracting much interest.

HMP Acklington's pioneering course

Located near Morpeth in Northumbria, HMP Acklington is a Category C prison for convicted adult male prisoners. Opened in 1972, it has an operational capacity of 882.

Activities at the prison include industrial workshops and painting and decorating. It is also the first prison in England and Wales to pilot a 14-week, full-time training course for cable jointers. The intensive course involves lessons, workshops and homework and covers theoretical and practical aspects of working on telecommunications cable networks.

It aims to help offenders turn their lives around by gaining meaningful employment in the telecoms industry and therefore contributing to society.

"As soon as they started this course, we noticed that the offenders were re-invigorated and more purposeful, self-confident and inspired," says National Offender Management Service (NOMS) Regional Offender Manager (ROM) North East, Mitch Egan.

One offender asked to stay in prison to complete the qualification rather than leave on his Home Detention Curfew release date.

Offender qualifications at the end of the course include: NVQ Level 2 Cable Jointing; Level 3 Cable Testing and Fault Finding, Pole Erection and Overhead Cabling, and New Roads and Streetworks Act (NRASWA); and Health & Safety and First Aid.

When the first group of offenders qualified as cable jointers, the 'passing out' ceremony was attended by BT, Enterprise and other leading companies.

Those who complete the course – and everyone has to date – are guaranteed a job interview for vacancies advertised by companies aligned to the Sector Skills Council.

Regional commissioning

NOMS aims to bridge the gap between custody and community and reduce re-offending by 10% by 2010. Central to its strategy and operations are commissioning (award of contracts) and contestability (supplier competition), which enable it to select the best service providers from the public, private, voluntary and faith sectors. NOMS also co-ordinates contractors' services, manages their performance and maximises accountability.

NOMS has devolved responsibility for reducing re-offending to nine regional offices in England and one in Wales. NOMS North East's Newcastle-based regional office commissions offender services across Northumbria, County Durham and Cleveland. The region has eight prisons and three probation areas.

Co-operation and partnership

The cable jointing course is the result of regional discussions and co-operation between regional commissioning organisation NOMS North East, HMP Acklington, Energy & Utility Skills, the North East Employers' Coalition, the Learning & Skills Council (LSC) and other public- and private-sector partners.

Energy & Utility Skills, the employer-led Sector Skills Council for electricity, gas, waste management and water, set up the course after hearing from employers that there was a shortage of cable jointers nationally. It then worked with support services company Enterprise to offer the offenders work experience on release.

"Gillian Brown, Regional Contracts Manager for Energy & Utility Skills, says: "This course gives offenders a chance to make a success of their lives and, thanks to employers coming on board, it can only go from strength to strength."

Stephen Rawlinson, Enterprise Head of Communications, says: "The course was tailored to meet our requirements, which means the offenders can start work as soon as they are released. There is a stigma attached to ex-offenders, but we don't see any reason why this group should be excluded from employment. They have served their time and we believe they deserve a second chance. In many cases, people given a second chance are more likely to work hard to take advantages of opportunities."

The LSC is responsible for funding and planning education and training (apart from higher education) for six million adults in England. Its new Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) brings together learning and skills for offenders in custody and the community. Chris Roberts, Regional Director, LSC North East, says: "Developing skills enhances the

employment prospects of offenders, reducing the risk of them re-offending. Ensuring offenders are able to access education will ensure they are given the best possible chances to turn their lives around and will also help supply the region's employers with a skilled workforce."

Mitch Egan says: "I'm grateful for the persistence of Ronnie Stephenson of Energy & Utility Skills and the courage and imagination of Mick Lees, HMP Acklington's Governor, in driving this course forward."

"Despite the practical problems of running such a course in a prison environment, I've been impressed by the determination shown by all concerned to overcome obstacles that could have prevented it getting off the ground."

Elaine Llewellyn, HMP Head of Industries, says: "This has been a huge learning curve for everyone concerned. We thank the employers and trainers for giving HMP Acklington the chance to prove that projects such as this can be successfully undertaken by prisoners."

Outcomes

Of the 18 offenders to have completed the first two courses, run in 2006 and spring 2007, 10 are now qualified cable jointers but still in prison completing their sentences. Of the eight who have been released, three are working in the telecoms industry (one has also been promoted to foreman) and three are awaiting their first work trial.

"The course has gone even better than expected and is a great example of what can be achieved by developing effective interventions in alliance with public- and private-sector organisations," says Mitch Egan. "It's good to see offenders showing the enthusiasm needed to succeed on this course, and the prospect of employment will only spur others to follow."

"The cable jointing course has attracted very positive media coverage and, let's remember, we work in a field that doesn't often attract positive media coverage. We've also received favourable comment from other NOMS regions."

The future

Another 10 offenders are due to complete a separate course, for general network operatives, in July 2007. HMP Acklington's next cable jointing course is due to start in August 2007.

"There's currently only one downside to the cable jointing course," says Mitch Egan. "It can accommodate only 10 to 12 offenders at a time and takes 14 weeks to complete. There are almost 900 prisoners at Acklington – and over 81,000 nationally. While expansion of this highly successful course is currently likely to be slow and steady, we're ready to expand it very much faster, get far more offenders into worthwhile careers and reduce re-offending."

Executive summary

HMP Acklington in Northumbria has introduced an innovative, pioneering, industry-backed cable jointing course for offenders. Those who complete the course – and everyone has to date – are guaranteed a job interview for vacancies advertised by Sector Skills Council-aligned companies.

Of the eight offenders who have completed the course and been released, three are already working in the telecoms industry and three are awaiting their first work trial.

The course has also attracted positive media coverage and interest and favourable comment from other NOMS regions.